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RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS 3496
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RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 1515

UNCLAS MINSK 000025

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DEPT ALSO FOR INR
KIEV ALSO FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: Latest Polling: Milinkevich Creeps Ahead in Polls, But Not Enough To Catch Lukashenko

¶1. Summary: The results of IISEPS' latest polling shows that Lukashenko retains high ratings, around 53 percent. Opposition support remains low, even for the 10+ opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich. Although Milinkevich's approval ratings did climb several points to 6.6 percent, a growing majority of Belarusians polled support Lukashenko's re-election. Most respondents believe they live better than people in Russia and admit that they would like to have living conditions similar to those in EU. However, 60 percent would choose a closer union with Russia over a union with the EU, which is largely due to Belarusians negative opinion of the West. Moreover, respondents showed greater support for the political policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Cuban leader Fidel Castro over those of President Bush and Belarus' neighbors, Poland and Lithuania. Most respondents continue to believe state-controlled media and do not trust independent and foreign news sources. While Lukashenko's popularity appears to be significant, it still is not an overwhelming as the state media portrays. End Summary.

¶2. IISEPS polling service gave poloffs results of two surveys conducted in November-December (I) and December (II) respectively. Survey I interviewed 1448 people and survey II interviewed 1514 people. Below are the results.

Presidential Support Is High, Opposition Low

¶3. Fifty-three percent of respondents in survey I believe President Lukashenko should be elected to a third term and 35 percent disagreed. Fifty-three percent would vote for the president and 12.5 percent would vote for an opposition candidate. Survey II showed that 49.2 percent of respondents would vote in the presidential election, most for Lukashenko. Thirty-eight percent believe it was time to give someone else a chance:

"If elections were tomorrow, who would you vote for?"

Survey I		Survey II	
Answer	%	Answer	%
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Lukashenko	51.2	Lukashenko	52.6
Milinkevich	3.5	Milinkevich	6.6
Lebedko	.8	Lebedko	2.4

¶4. Milinkevich's support jumped three percentage points in less than one month. If just Milinkevich and Lukashenko were on the ballots, 54.8 percent of respondents in survey II would chose Lukashenko, but 18.1 percent would chose Milinkevich. No other opposition leader received as high a rating when paired with Lukashenko as did Milinkevich. Aleksandr Voitovich, former MP, received 7.3 percent, MP and leader of the liberal Democratic Party Sergei Gaidukevich received 9.2 percent, leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Gramada) Aleksandr Kozulin received 9.7, and General Frolov received 8.6. If Milinkevich was not allowed to be on the presidential ballot, only 8 percent of respondents would protest. Although most respondents showed no interest in Milinkevich, 30.9 percent would like more information about him and his campaign.

¶5. In survey I, 49.5 percent of those polled believe the elections would be free and fair whereas 28.9 percent disagreed. Survey II showed similar percentages. In survey II, 42.3 percent of respondents believe that the current election codex did not prevent free and fair elections and should not be changed, however 39.2 percent thought otherwise. If election results turned out to be falsified, 73 percent of respondents in survey I would not take part in street protests. Percentages were approximately the same in Survey II.

Human Rights Exist, Sort Of

¶6. Fifty-three percent of respondents in survey I were satisfied with the development of democracy in Belarus whereas 34.8 percent were not. Fifty-nine percent thought that Belarus observes human rights, but 75.2 percent believe people were afraid to voice their opinions:

"What do you think about the readiness of people in Belarus to express their political opinions?"

Answer	%
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No one is afraid	14.0
Few people afraid	27.1
Many people afraid	41.0
All people afraid	7.2

¶7. When told about opposition leaders Nikolai Statkevich, Pavel Severinets, and Andrei Klimov's incarceration for staging protests against the GOB, 35 percent of respondents in survey II responded negatively to their imprisonment and only 16.5 percent were in favor. Thirty-four percent had no opinion on the matter.

Standard of Living

¶8. The two surveys indicated that 58 and 60 percent of respondents (respectively) did not see any difference in their material situation within the last three months. Survey II indicated that 38 percent of respondents were concerned with material needs, such as money and the low standard of living. Eighteen percent worry about health and 14 percent were concerned with unemployment. Survey II showed that 48.5 percent of respondents were able to buy enough food on their wages, but 47.6 percent found it difficult to afford clothes and 79.6 percent were not able to make larger purchases, such as cars and furniture. In survey I, respondents compared the standard of living in Belarus with that of other former USSR countries:

Country	Higher	Same	Lower
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Poland	55.0(%)	14.1	6.6
Latvia	42.4	14.0	10.5
Lithuania	40.5	15.5	10.9

Russia	21.7	35.4	24.5
Ukraine	4.2	21.9	55.1

¶9. In survey I, 55.7 percent of respondents believe it was important to maintain the current situation in Belarus and survey II showed 54.6 percent of respondents answered likewise.

"Do you think the situation in Belarus is developing on the right path or the wrong path?"

Answer	Survey I	Survey II
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Right path	62.4	55.0
Wrong path	20.7	29.7

¶10. Although the majority of Belarusians believe their country was on the right path, only 35 percent of survey II respondents believe Belarus' social-economic situation would change in the future, whereas 39 percent believe it would not change and 15 percent agreed it would worsen.

Russia over EU

¶11. IISEPS discovered that 48 percent of survey I respondents did not want to see a revival of the USSR, but did want closer relations with Russia over the EU. Sixty-seven percent of those polled believe they live better than Russians, but 51 percent believe people live better in the EU than in Belarus. Sixty-three percent would like to have a living standard similar to that in the EU, 81 percent favor Belarusians receiving an education in EU, and 64 percent favor letting Belarusians work in the EU.

¶12. Despite better living and working conditions in the West, survey II showed that 60 percent of respondents would rather have a union with Russia than with the EU. This phenomenon could be attributed to the negative image Belarusians have of the West thanks to GOB-controlled propaganda (see para 14). IISEPS asked the following questions in survey I:

"Do you think the West looks at Belarus as an enemy and that Belarusians should beware?"

Answer	%
-----	----
No	41.9
Yes	40.0

"Do you think life for citizens of Belarus' neighbors (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania) has improved or worsened since they became part of the EU in May 2004?"

Worse	23.7
No Change	25.2
Better	19.4

"Have you been to any EU countries in the last five years?"

No	83.0
Yes	16.8

"What presents a greater threat to Belarus' development? (survey II)"

The West	34.2
The GOB	18.0
The Opposition	14.6
Russia	4.1
No Threat	27.7

¶13. Fifty-two percent of survey I respondents prefer a union with Russia in which both governments remain independent with close political and economic connections. Twenty percent believe relations should remain the same and only 12

percent believe the two nations should become one.

"Soon there will possibly be a referendum between Belarus and Russia on the Constitutional Act, which would provide a closer integration between the two governments. How would you vote?"

Answer	Survey I	Survey II
-----	-----	-----
For	27.4(%)	41.7
Against	10.3	11.2
Depends on circumstances	37.2	29.7
Will not participate	8.9	10.8

"In your opinion, which country has made more progress creating a democratic government and civil society?"

Answer	%
-----	-----
Belarus	35.1
Russia	29.5
No Answer	35.4

"In your opinion, does the Russian government want Belarus to become part of Russia and cease being an independent country?"

Yes	46.9
No	26.5
No Answer	26.6

"Who will Belarus be closer to in 10 years, Russia or the EU?"

Russia	63.1
EU	8.7
No Answer	28.2

"Do you accept or not accept the political course of the following countries?"

Country	Accept	Not Accept
-----	-----	-----
Russia	74.8	15.9
Belarus	72.0	22.3
Germany	70.8	16.4
China	53.2	30.3
Kazakhstan	46.6	36.5
Poland	46.0	39.1
Cuba	36.0	45.1
South Korea	31.6	48.9
Ukraine	26.9	59.2
U.S.	25.2	61.7
Iran	20.4	61.6

"Who out of today's top leaders coincides with your political ideals?" (More than one answer)

Lukashenko	51.8
Putin	51.8
Chirac	13.1
Blair	6.4
Castro	6.2
Merkel	5.4
Yushchenko	3.8
Bush	3.7
Frieberg (Latvia)	0.9
Akhmadinijad (Iran)	0.8

Information Access

14. Belarusians have little access to news sources other than the state-controlled media. Although some independent

sources exist within Belarus, few people listen or trust them.

"Which of the following do you have access to at work and/or at home?" (More than one answer)

Answer	Survey I	Survey II
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Belarusian TV channels	86.1	86.1
FM Radio	46.7	53.2
Cable TV	36.9	38.6
Medium/Long Wave Radio	14.2	15.9
Internet	13.6	14.6
Short Wave Radio	13.2	12.5
Satellite TV	6.9	8.9

"What source of information do you believe more?" (Survey I)

Answer	%
-----	----
GOB-controlled Media	58.2
Russian Media	35.2
Belarusian Independent Media	12.0
European and Western Media	10.2
Internet	8.8

¶15. IISEPS discovered in survey I that fewer than 35 percent of respondents use a computer and less than 24.7 percent use the internet. In survey II, those figures were 33.5 and 22.6 respectively. Less than ten percent of respondents listen to Western radio, such as Radio Liberty, BBC, Voice of America, Ukrainian radio, etc. Fifteen percent listen to Russian radio broadcasts daily and 16.3 percent listen to Russian radio several times per week. Forty-nine percent of those polled would like to receive independent radio and television broadcasts from surrounding countries, but 34 percent believe foreign radio broadcasts, for example, would not portray the truth where as only 25.4 believe it would.

¶16. Forty-five percent of those polled believe GOB-controlled TV is truthful about Western activities and how people live in the West. Survey II showed that 64.7 percent of respondents trust GOB-controlled TV channel ONT, 60.8 percent - Belarusian National Television BT, and 44 - Stolichnaye TV. Twenty-five percent do not believe the internet, 43 percent do not believe Belarus' independent newspapers and 45 percent do not trust Western radio broadcasts.

Comment

¶17. Although Milinkevich's ratings increased, Lukashenko still retains a strong lead over any potential opponent. Even without election falsifications, Lukashenko would theoretically win the elections if they were held tomorrow. With the help of his propaganda and lack of independent information, Lukashenko continues to successfully convince a significant portion of the population that Belarus is better off under his rule, despite the better living conditions in the EU, and that the West seeks to destroy Belarus' course of development.

¶18. The polling results reinforce the point that democratic change is not likely in the short term, nor without access to independent media. In the current information vacuum, most Belarusians are unable to make the connection between their economic situation and the country's political-economic policies. It is also worth noting that despite Lukashenko's continued popularity, it is not as overwhelming as the state media presents, and the depth of that support is suspect if a strong alternative could ever emerge.

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